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TAGS: ECON ETRD KS PGOV PREL
SUBJECT: POLITICIANS GO HUNGRY TO OPPOSE FTA

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Two progressive presidential contenders started a hunger strike this week demanding the KORUS FTA talks be halted. Coupled with recent controversial statements out of the Blue House - Roh said he was, "the one to make the final decision on the FTA" - political debate about the FTA is peaking in the negotiations' final days. On March 26, former Justice Minister Chun Jung-bae stopped eating and former Uri Party Chairman Kim Geun-tae followed on March 27. Most of the public, however, are skeptical about the two progressive leaders' motivation to oppose the FTA, especially as they were key ministers in the Roh Administration. General sentiment is that the hunger strikes are aimed less at stopping the FTA than at resuscitating the progressive party ahead of the December presidential elections. Despite the poor reception Kim and Chun have received, they are nonetheless drawing attention to themselves as candidates. Also, the unexpectedly aggressive opposition by relatively mainstream former Uri Party leaders may have decreased the political room for maneuver for President Roh. END SUMMARY

CHUN JUNG-BAE AND KIM GEUN-TAE

¶3. (C) One of Chun's advisors, Representative Choi Jae-cheon, told poloff on March 27 that Chun did not expect the hunger strike to result in a stoppage of the KORUS FTA negotiations and admitted the strike was simply "a symbolic gesture." Chun said on March 29 that he would abandon his presidential candidacy if only the KORUS FTA negotiations stopped. Kim, former chairman of the Uri Party, said the ROKG would have to "tread over him" in order to continue the FTA and he added that "even if the hunger strike was a political show, the FTA must stop." Both Kim and Chun's

basic stated rationale for opposing the agreement is that a hasty agreement would be detrimental to the national economy and the national interest.

¶4. (C) According to a leading political analyst Kang Won-taek, "any (progressive) presidential candidate would be wise to oppose the FTA as a means to stand out of the crowd." No potential progressive candidate enjoys double digit support while Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye, the two main opposition candidates, have 42.3 and 20.7 percent support respectively, according to a March 28 Joongang Ilbo poll.

¶5. (C) In addition to the two presidential hopefuls, two Democratic Labor Party members have been fasting for over two weeks and one other ex-Uri lawmaker started his fast on March ¶27. Opposition party GNP lawmaker Chun Yu-ok said the fasts were "low-level comedy."

PRESIDENT ROH'S ROLE

¶6. (C) President Roh told Blue House staffers before he left Korea for the Middle East on March 24 that he would not accept the outcome of the KORUS FTA negotiations if the rice and beef issues were not settled. Roh also reportedly expressed concern with the course of the negotiations and said that he would issue an official statement on April 1 on the FTA and begin a discussion with the Korean people on the merits of the agreement. Roh emphasized that he was the one with final decision-making authority on the FTA.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) South Korean politicians have a long history of hunger strikes. During their opposition days, former Presidents Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung went hungry for many days. Still, the sight of two recent cabinet members doing without food for a trade agreement has not struck much sympathy among the Korean public. They believe that if Chun and Kim were against the FTA, they should have acted earlier. But then, it cannot do them much harm either, as neither top 2 percent in polls. However, these fasts show that passionate views are involved and that the KORUS FTA could be a political hot potato for months to come as discussion of the merits of the potential agreement and ratification will come during peak presidential campaigning. The unexpected opposition from former cabinet members also raises political concerns for Roh as he weighs whether the tradeoffs needed to conclude KORUS FTA will damage the legitimacy of his personal "progressive" political legacy.

VERSHBOW